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THE ECONOMIC HANDICAP OF THE NEGRO IN THE NORTH

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The economic problem growing out of the negro's presence in the North borrows importance from the prevailing dread of an overwhelming influx from the South. This conclusion is founded on fear rather than on careful consideration of the facts and factors entering into the premises. Although during the last forty years there has been a thin stream of movement towards the North, yet it has not been sufficient in volume to alter the course of the general current which is moving steadily towards the Gulf of Mexico. The total number of negroes in the thirty-one free States of the North and West does not equal the negro population of the single State of Alabama. The last census decade was one of great unrest among the negroes of the South, and yet during that interval the increment in the Northern element was but slightly in excess of the natural increase in the State of Georgia. If we make the slightest marginal allowance for the increase of the negroes who were in the North in 1900, it will be seen that the entire Northern influx which occasions so much frantic discussion would be less than the growth in a single Southern State. The negro population at large arose from 4,880,000 in 1860 to 8,840,789 in 1900. In the meantime the Northern contingent had grown from 227,216 to 759,788, or from 5 per cent. to 8½ per cent. of the entire race. If the first generation after emancipation which violently upset established order shows such slight dispersive tendency, we are surely not justified in the fear that in times of comparative quiet there will be a mad hejira to the northern tier of States.

We must also take into account that the negro in the North does not seem to be a self-sustaining quantity, and unless constantly re-enforced from without would probably dwindle to the vanishing point. This failure of the race to thrive in the higher latitudes is

not, in my judgment, due so much to geographical reasons as to the benumbing effect of an unfriendly environment. An isolated class imprisoned in the midst of a more powerful and populous people is apt to be affected in its reproductiveness in some such way as animals which fail to multiply under captivity. But, however we may speculate as to the cause, the effect remains the same. The growth of the negro element in the North has been due almost or quite wholly to immigration, and not to natural increase, and it seems entirely safe to rely upon the continuance of this tendency. When this Northern movement is checked the Northern negro will become a stationary or a diminishing quantity.

Seven-tenths of the Northern negroes are found in the cities. The Northern influx during the last decade was mainly to the large cities of that section. Outside of these centers the tendency is to diminish rather than to increase. From 1890 to 1900 there was an actual decrease of the negro population in seven Northern States.

The city influx is subject to self limitation. We cannot safely base general conclusions upon the happenings of a single decade. Each city will hold just so many of this element in solution before reaching the point of saturation, beyond which it cannot go. Such cities as Charleston, Richmond, Nashville and Washington have well nigh reached that point, and the last census shows only a slight tendency of growth, and fell far short of the general increment of the negro population at large.

All of this goes to show that the economic and general problems growing out of the situation of the Northern negro are rather incidental and temporary, and form but a fragmentary part of the great race problem whose situs is in the South.

Surprise is sometimes expressed that this race does not in larger numbers remove itself from the political and civil restrictions of the South to the more liberal regime of the freer States. But it is economic rather than political motives that influence the movement of modern population. A conservative tendency disposes all people to endure political ills at home rather than fly to industrial conditions they know not of. If we except the more restless and ambitious spirit, the twenty million foreigners who have come to this country since 1820 have not been attracted by an asylum from political oppression, but have come in quest of better economic opportunity and outlook. The gates of Ellis Island swing inward towards better in-

dustrial conditions. Should conditions be reversed, and should European countries offer higher wages and better conditions of living, there would be a reflux tide at once and the gate of Ellis Island would swing outward.

In the North it is true that the negro enjoys the fullest political prerogative, his educational facilities are the best that the world affords, and yet these things attract not the mass of the race, simply because they do not carry with them corresponding industrial opportunity. The negro may for a time drift about blindly, but in the long run he will be controlled by this great economic motive which governs other people, and no amount of moralizing on our part can affect this result. The Northern movement will continue only so long as the North seems to offer the better economic advantage. When an industrial and economic equilibrium, so far as the negro is concerned, is established between the two sections the further Northern movement will be merely as flying fragments leaving the mass of the race unaffected. As inevitably as water when unrestrained flows from a higher to a lower level, so work people, white or black, move from lower to higher economic opportunity.

In dealing with the economic handicap of the negro in the North, we may as well limit our attention to the larger cities of that section and include in this category such border cities as Washington, Baltimore, St. Louis and Louisville, where the colored workman meets with much the same industrial disadvantages as in the higher latitude. Indeed the industrial status of the negro is not determined so much by the geography of his position as by the relative number of white men with whom he must enter into industrial rivalry.

The broad distinction between the negro workman in the North and in the South is that in one section he is confined generally to agricultural pursuits, whereas in the other he is shut in to personal and domestic service. It is also true that in the South, especially in the lower and hotter tier of Southern States, where white competition is not energetic, he is largely engaged in mechanical pursuits, a calling from which he is all but absolutely excluded in the North. When Jacksonville, Fla., was destroyed by fire several years ago it was rebuilt largely by negro mechanics; but no skilled negro workman lifted a hammer or wielded a saw in restoring the city of Baltimore from that awful deluge of fire two years ago.

Great indeed is the handicap of that class which is shut in to a

single line of occupation, and that, too, the one which is regarded as least remunerative and most benumbing to the just aspiration of an American citizen. The trades unions, either by the letter of the law or by the spirit in which it is executed, effectually bar the negro from the more remunerative pursuits of trade and transportation. The negro workman is thus compelled to loiter around the outer edge of industry and to pick up such menial work or odds-and-ends pursuits as white men do not care to undertake.

The negro is being driven even from the domain of domestic and semi-domestic service as fast as white men fill up the higher fields of mechanical skill and press downwards into the lower stratum of occupation. Pursuits once monopolized by the negro in the North are rapidly passing from him. The white waiter, barber, and coachman poaches defiantly upon the black man's industrial preserves. The industrial rivalry among men is almost as brutal as the struggle for existence among beasts of the forest. The attitude of the trade union towards the negro is that of intolerance and exclusion. They say to the black workman, "We fear lest there be not enough for you and us."

I cannot agree with Dr. Booker T. Washington that these pursuits are passing from the black man because of his shiftlessness and inefficiency. It is rather the case of the stronger competitor pushing the weak to the wall. The strong man enters into the house of the weak, binds him and takes his possessions, and heeds not his wail of entreaty. The smallness of his numbers is the negro's industrial weakness in the North. The white man in the union has nothing to fear from the black man's competition outside the union. Whereas in the South the trades unions must reckon with the black workman who forms a sufficiently numerous class to threaten their industrial supremacy by a flank movement. The negro waiter is polite and good-natured, and a more skillful manipulator of dishes can hardly be imagined. The negro coachman when carefully trained in his duties is keenly alive to the amenities of his position, and is a good enough disciple of Jehu for all practical purposes. The whole world acknowledges that the negro is an expert with the razor. And yet the white man supplants him by sheer virtue of the fact that he belongs to the more numerous and preferred class. These are grievous conditions and seriously must they be dealt with.

As meager as are his earning opportunities, when it comes to

renting a house, which in the nature of the case must absorb a large part of his earnings, he is often forced to pay a higher rate of rental than his white competitor for like accommodations. There is a double diminution of the fraction, both by decreasing the numerator and by increasing the denominator.

The destruction of the poor is his poverty. The excess of negro females over males is a most striking feature of the negro population in most of the large centers. In Washington and Baltimore this excess reaches the startling disproportion of 126 females to every 100 males. This enormous disproportion is both an effect and a fresh cause of economic adversity. It complicates every factor in the life of the race, and no plan can be proposed for the general betterment of this class that does take this serious factor into account.

The negro in the North, by reason of his hard industrial lot, is forced to live in the alleys and shady places, the breeders of vice and crime, of disease and death, and the feeders of jails, hospitals and penitentiaries. When these cities are threatened with such frightful death rate and crime rate among this neglected class they should remember that it is but the logical outcome of the hard industrial lot.

But I suppose that I am desired to point out remedies, rather than dilate upon evil conditions which all recognize and deplore. To propose solutions for insoluble problems is an easy and agreeable exercise of the mind. Every other American has a solution of the race problem which is relied upon with as much assurance as a patent nostrum to cure a chronic or constitutional disease. Solutions of the race problem remind us of the patient who declared that all remedies for the rheumatism were equally effective; for he had tried them all, with the result that his aches and pains were in no wise abated. I beg to present the following suggestions with the hope that their value will be revealed upon analysis:

1. Should the negro laborer receive more just and equitable treatment in the South there would be less migratory disposition and dissatisfaction on his part. The cases of peonage and chain gang abuses recently brought to light are but extreme instances of the many ways in which the black man forcibly or guilefully is deprived of the just fruits of his labor.

There is too much of the traditional bias of the slave regime which regards the negro as an inferior order of nature placed in the world to be exploited by his white lord and master. It seems to be a

hard lesson for the employing class to learn that the laborer is entitled to the same human considerations as himself. This ruthless disregard of the manhood side of the workman breeds restlessness and discontent. Those who employ labor should be most concerned in making the laborer satisfied and contented, thus insuring his highest efficiency. The South is the natural habitat of the negro on this continent, and there would be a lessening tendency to drift northward if he were assured of the full fruits of his labor and of a square deal as a workman and as an American citizen.

2. The negro in the North must make himself efficient, according to the highest standard of service in whatever field he may be engaged. He must be doubly fortified against the prevailing tendency to supplant him with workmen of the preferred class on the score of superior efficiency.

3. There should be organized under competent auspices a bureau of information which should furnish to the masses of the race through the negro press, pulpit and other agencies of reaching and influencing public opinion and action, accurate knowledge of the evil of indiscriminate influx to the North as well as the advantages of judicious migration of selected individuals. Any proposition looking towards restriction upon the freedom of movement of any class of citizens is of course repugnant to the principles of our institutions. It is not the individual who intelligently concludes that he can better his condition by moving to the North whom it is desirable to restrain, but the blind, indiscriminate tendency impelling the thoughtless to drift about without plan or purpose. If industrially inclined and well disposed negroes in limited numbers could be directed to the smaller towns and rural communities of the North they could find remunerative work and kindly treatment. The negro needs to come in close contact with the Northern habit and method of work. The whole North might thus be made to serve as a vast training school for young negroes of both sexes who might acquire the Northern secret and method with the hope of finding opportunity of exploiting it among their own people in the South. Under the slave regime the Northern mechanic was brought South in order that negro apprentices might learn the different mechanical trades. This was the origin of the slave mechanic who is now passing off the stage without leaving a successor. Just as the negro youth go to Harvard and Yale and carry their acquired knowledge to the South

to be exploited among their own constituency, so in the common household economy and in the ordinary workaday pursuits the negro may learn much by contact with the North.

4. Where there is to be found a considerable number of negroes they must create opportunity by catering to the needs and necessities of their own class. The number of negro stores and small business places that are springing up in all of the large cities constitutes the most hopeful indication above the gloomy economic horizon.

5. It may not be too much to hope that the Golden Rule will be applied to the economical domain. An able-bodied beggar in a democracy is a monstrosity. There is only one form of begging that is justifiable, and that is begging the opportunity to work upon the highest level of one's skill and efficiency.

Too much stress is wont to be laid upon the antipathy of the white workman to affiliate with his black co-laborer. In the South from time immemorial the two races have worked side by side on terms of industrial equality without prejudice to the personal claims or pretensions of either. The Northern employer is too prone to turn off the colored applicant with the bland assurance that he himself would have no objection, but his white workmen would disrupt the business if a black competitor were forced upon them. This intolerant attitude against the negro workman is largely a matter of fad and fancy. Upon the show of firmness on the part of the employer it would soon vanish away. The public becomes accustomed to a scheme of things from which the negro is excluded and soon comes to look upon it as a fixed, natural order. In Washington City we have colored members of the police force, and have become unconscious of their presence; but in Baltimore a colored officer of the law would be regarded as a serious menace to the supremacy of the white race. Philadelphia has become so accustomed to colored policemen that their presence no longer occasions remark or curious comment, but in New York, a city ninety miles further North, this would at first be regarded as an intolerable innovation. A colored motorman on the electric cars in the streets of Philadelphia would at first tie up street car traffic. The other brakemen, native and foreign-born, intelligent and illiterate, would enter upon a strike, and would remain out as long as they felt sure that they were not imperiling the permanence of their position. But if the corporation, backed up by a just public sentiment, should insist upon the right to employ

men according to their fitness alone, the recalcitrant brakemen would one by one sneak back into their old positions, and the good old City of Brotherly Love would forthwith sink into its accustomed quietness, and would think no more of the color of the man who manipulates the car cranks than of the color of his hair or the curvature of his eyebrows.

So long as the North treats the negro workman with blighting discrimination it is left little moral ground for complaint against the South where a like spirit assumes a different form of manifestation. "Ye take my life when ye do take the means whereby I live."